THE FOUR Rs

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

June 14, 2020

In the so-called “good old days”—whatever and whenever those were—public schools used to boast that they taught the ‘3-Rs’ – “reading, ‘riting’, and ‘rithmetic—all to the tune of a hickory stick.”

Had a ministry friend who lived in Beckley, WV (southeast WV), and there there were 4 r’s: reading, ‘riting,’ ‘rithmetic, and the road to Roanoke (That was the fastest way out of West Virginia from there!) Apparently, this was the local version of the maxim that a good education can take you anywhere you want to go.

There are another ‘4-Rs’ that will get you even further than Roanoke. These ‘4-Rs’ are the key survival skills of the 21st century: roots, rituals, relationships, and realities. Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seeds suggests the power of these ‘4-Rs’ is such that when all are positively present, they can bring us to the very brink of the kingdom of heaven.

In Jesus’ parable, the sower casts out seeds which fall on four different environments. The environment determines the seeds’ ability to grow and survive and bear fruit.

R #1: ROOTS

The batch of seeds cast by the sower that fall onto the rocky ground immediately shoot up high stalks, for there was virtually no soil for putting down roots. But all this frantic upward growth was in vain. The first day of scorching heat withered these high stalks. They had no root system to bring them nourishment and sustain them through the fierce midday sun.

Roots are just as crucial to humans as they are to plants. Even in this restless U-Haul culture, we still develop a sense of who we are based on where we come from.

In baseball, home plate is both the beginning and destination of your journey. You go from base to base, with perils in each base path—pick-offs, rundowns, force-outs, double plays, and strike outs. You are finally safe only when you get back to your roots—home plate.

Poet John Berryman, who ridiculed those who asked about his ‘roots’ (‘as if I were a plant,’ he scoffed) – he wrote this credo of rootlessness:

Exile is in our time like blood.

Depend on interior ljourneys taken anywhere.

I’d rather live in Venice or Kyoto,

except for the languages, but

O really, I don’t care where I live

or have lived. Wherever I am, young Sir, my

wits about me,

memory blazing, I’ll cope and make do.

By the way, Berryman wrote this poetic psalm to rootlessness not long before he leapt from a bridge over the Mississippi River and committed suicide.

Maybe for Americans, a deep grounding in roots is more poignant than for others. Since all Americans, except Indiginous peoples, Native Americans, originally came from somewhere else, we take pains to know whether we are Scotch-Irish, or Italian-French, or Swahili-Tutsi, or Russian-Iluit. We want part of who we are to reflect where we came from.

Likewise, Christians need to get in touch with their roots. To understand who has gone before us, to know who brought the faith forward to this time and clime, takes a complex root system that is now nearly 2,000 years old. While we do not need to memorize every branch and snarl in that web of life-supporting nourishment, we do need to recognize that it is the dense complexity of those roots that provides us with the solid ground we stand on and the enzymes and nourishment that enable us to grow.

And that growth, that luxuriant fruitfulness we look for from this complex root system we have brings the nourishment, the hydration for a parched soul, that comes from God’s Holy Spirit and our Lord Jesus, the Christ, huh?

R #2: RITUALS

The first seeds cast out by Jesus’ sower landed ‘on the path.’ The way was smooth, but the ground was hard, compacted by back-and-forth- traffic. All the seed could do was lie on top of the ground, exposed and barren. Not surprisingly, these seeds were swiftly scooped up by hungry birds.

None of us can survive in a life that is barren of beauty, devoid of decoration, empty of ritual. We need special markings and moments to help us define the parameters of our lives and the passing of our days. To this end, all of us create rituals that help guide us forward and bring us back again. Some rituals are practiced so often they become ingrained habits.

We have morning rituals—which help us get up and prepare to face a new day. Whether these involve a 20 minute hot shower or a 40 minute cold run through the park, these rituals help settle our souls.

As do evening rituals, such as teaching our children to say their prayers before they go to bed. Those very prayers nourish our own souls, and the habit stays with some of us as a soul-nourishing ritual even after the children have grown and gone.

Rituals move us through life with intention and integrity. Without rituals, the sands of time run unheeded through the hourglass of our lives. With rituals, these same grains of sand create a particular pattern or design that helps tell the story of our lives.

The church, of course, is steeped in ritual. Protestant churches may seem rather less concerned with formalized ritual than with the Roman Catholics or Orthodox churches. And some denominations are taught to view rituals suspiciously, deeming them a superstitious substitution for true faith and genuine piety.

But think about it. This form of worship we have is a ritual, with elements we just miss if they’re not there. Matter of fact, the Nurture Committee prevailed on me to reinstate the Gloria Patri and the Doxology to this online liturgy we have because they missed ‘em. A ritual, huh? And I think we’d miss the Lord’s Prayer if it weren’t there after the pastoral prayers. Matter of fact, I have forgotten it during Communion Services because in those services, it is at a different place than ordinarily, and you’ve told me about it! As long as a ritual reaches our hearts and speaks a message to our souls, it enriches the soil necessary for faith.

R #3: RELATIONSHIPS

The third batch of seeds described in Jesus’ parable had a short life because of the company they kept. There was nothing wrong with the soil these seeds fell on—it was deep enough, soft enough and rich enough to sustain them. But this soil also supported a fine crop of thorns and thistles. These prickly neighbors were stronger and more vigorous than the seeds of our parable. In the race for survival, the thorns won—choking out their neighboring plants.

Relationships are tricky things. We can’t live without them, but sometimes we sure we wish we could. On days when you and your spouse fight, the kids hate you, your co-workers mistrust you, and even the guy who bags your groceries gives you a dirty look. The possibilities of a hermit’s life begin to look pretty good.

But we are hopelessly interconnected creatures. From the day we are born, we are enmeshed with the lives of others. Those very first relationships we develop with our family are different from any others we will ever know. Together they create for us our first home.

The most familiar definition of home in the English language is from Robert Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man” in lines spoken by a Yankee farmer:

Home is the place where, when you

have to go there,

they have to take you in.

Less familiar is the wife’s reply:

I should have called it

Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.

I side with the wife. Home is best seen not as a place where you have to go, but where you want to go; not a place where they “have to take you in,” but where they want to take you in, where you are welcomed by the people in it, animals in it, the furniture, the food, the bric-a-brac.

The church is our Home, isn’t it? And God’s people are our family. Thank God!

R #4: REALITIES

The final seeds mentioned in Jesus’ parable were the lucky ones. Falling onto good soil, free of weeds and sheltered from weather, these seeds sprouted and grew vigorously. Because everything was working in their favor, these seeds were able to produce a harvest that far exceeded the norm.

We all have different realities with which to contend. For the Christian, life’s ‘realities’—death, disease, rejection, conflict, loneliness, disabilities – do not excuse us from choice or responsibility.

Psychologist/physiologist Laura Schlesssinger, the host of her own radio program, says that the question most frequently asked of her in interviews is, “What is the number one, most typically asked question on your internationally syndicated show?” Her answer? “The caller usually wants to know this: ‘Now that I’ve done all these things I shouldn’t have done, how can I avoid the consequences I knew, but denied, and just hoped would not happen?’”

Schlessisnger confesses that her pet peeve is “when callers protest that they are ‘only human.’ ONLY human? As if one’s humanness were a blueprint for instinctive, reflexive reactions to situations, as it is in the rest of the animal kingdom. I see being ‘human’ as the unique opportunity to use our minds and wills to act in ways that elevate us above the animal kingdom.” Schlessinger then closes her point with an illustration from the film classic *The African Queen.*

Humphrey Bogart as Charlie, the solitary sailor, tries to invoke the ‘only human’ excuse when he attempts to explain his prior drunken evening. Katherine Hepburn as Rosie, the missionary, peers over her Bible and aptly retorts, “We were put on the earth to rise above nature.”

God made us a little lower than the angels, and we’ve been making ourselves lower ever since. It’s time to claim our destiny as sons and daughters of God, created in God’s own image. The 4 Rs can do it: roots, rituals, relationships, and realities.

You and I have been given, or we’ve made -- with God’s help -- a plot of God’s earthiness that is rich, workable, and full of the nutrients of Jesus Christ. That is ***reality*** for a Christian who’s trying to work this piece of God’s ground. A reality we can count on.

Amen.